

Dek Unu Magazine

Fine Photography



April, 2019

Stafford Smith *"Accidental Ancestry"*

All images ©Stafford Smith

Dek Unu Magazine

Eleven

This is **Dek Unu Magazine**. In Esperanto, *dek unu* means "eleven." Eleven Images from a single artist. Eleven artists in eleven solo issues each year.

Dek Unu publishes the work of a new photoartist in each issue. The artist's work and words are featured alone and in individual focus as the sole purpose for each issue of the magazine. Unlike other arts and letters magazines which might look for work from a variety of artists to support an editorial staff's theme, at **Dek Unu**, theme and imagery are always each artist's own.

This Month

Just as some musicians object to digital sound, some visual artists need an art that is hand made. Stafford Smith is one of those artists. His alcohol transfer prints start out digital but end up unique, one-of-a-kind prints which are very much like watercolors, ethereal but tangible, dream-world and real-world combined, and all showing clearly the artist's touch.

Using his own photography, visuals from a box of inherited family papers, found inputs from antique and thrift shop sales, along with his mother's stories about his Japanese-American heritage, Smith creates an imaginative topical and emotional reflection on his own ancestry and the mesh of cultures in the family of man.





In Praise of Shadows



Accidental Ancestry



Rites of Spring



Glacial Fantasy



Attention Japs



Persistence of Memory



Power Play



To All Persons



Culture Clash



Food for Winter



The Lepidopterist

Artist Interview - Stafford Smith

Hi, Stafford. An imaginative look into your ancestry!

The idea began from free association of old images cluttering up my hard drive and all but forgotten in a box in the attic. I didn't have a plan or really know what I was doing. As I made more and more of them, patterns started to emerge, but it took a couple of years before I figured out it was about my ancestry. I think what holds it all together are the stares of people suddenly taken out of context and thrust into new ones. To me they look surprised.

The oldest photo is from the Meiji Era in Japan, which would be the 1870's. That's of my maternal great grand father who was of the last generation to be samurai. The photos from my father's family date back to the turn of the century through the jazz age up into the war years. There aren't that many photos from my father's side so I've supplemented them from thrift and antique finds of old negatives and tintypes.

I'm the result of a merger from elements of an old New England family that remained loyal to the king and a warrior family from Japan that immigrated to Hawaii. My information comes from oft repeated family stories, old letters and research my mother is doing on the family.

The story of the family is a story of "separated" families.

My parents divorced when I was ten and all my dad left me was a watch and, unintentionally, a box of old photos and letters. I don't know much about his side of the family except that they had money once but it was gone before he was born. There's also an unintended tradition that Smith sons don't know where their fathers are buried. He and my mother met at the University of Hawaii after he got out of the Coast Guard. My mother grew up in Honolulu with three sisters and two brothers. Her father edited the *Honolulu Star Bulletin* and her mother had trouble fitting in because of her educated background. Her side of the family liked to talk up the samurai lineage and it is a major point of pride since immigrating to the States marked a major drop in financial and social status.

Our cover, "Culture Clash," zeros in on that theme as well.

I began with the photo of the antique boy doll. It's one of the family heirlooms brought from Japan. I saw a parallel between it and the

little boy in the photo, who is my father, as references to childhood. An ocean divides them at this point but it will be crossed and they will meet in the future, perhaps as friends, perhaps as enemies



As I was growing up my mother told many stories about the hardship of working on the plantations in Hawaii, the lordly landowners, the racist teachers, but also the wonderful multi-ethnic friends she had. Hawaii was a melting pot of Koreans, Portuguese, Chinese, and Caucasian in addition to the Japanese. My mother still talks about carrying a gas mask to school during the war and hiding in bomb-shelters during drills.

You include clips from the WWII era newspapers and the internment camps, particularly in "Attention Japs."

Although my family was not interned, as very few people from Hawaii were, they did have to hide the Japanese artifacts they brought with them. The swords, scrolls, and artwork were buried until after the war. There was even talk of interning my grandfather because of his status at the newspaper. I feel affinity for the Japanese-Americans who were interned because of the shared ethnic heritage and how the effects from that period still linger. Even my kids growing up in the 21st century have been taunted about Pearl Harbor. I feel the country right now is in danger of resurrecting some of this xenophobic practice with the drums of hatred spewing from some social media and television outlets.



Your website includes a set of photo studies of other families as well. Why is this a particular interest to you as an artist?

I did notice that connection. I guess it's an obsession of mine. When my kids were younger I was interested in representations of the family. Now that they're pretty much grown, I think more about the generations and how we came to be. There is a fine line that I walk, as a father and artist, between exposing my children to the arts and over-doing it with too many "trips." My kids do not share my obsession. Both want to be political scientists.

How did you get started as a photo-artist?

I've always been interested in art. I started drawing comic books in middle school and majored in printmaking at Wesleyan University. After graduating I spent a decade in Japanese-related television. I got sick of that and quit in 2002. We were living in Ithaca, New York, raising our first child, and I was taking photo classes at Cornell during the summer. I made an image that I thought was pretty stunning. So I started looking to see how I could get into a graduate program. I got my MFA in photo from Cornell in 2004. I see my photo-art as a blend of all the different media that I've worked in. These montages are like a stew that's been simmering in the back of my head for years.

How did Japan influence your photography?

I spent about 5 years living in Japan. What I love about it is the embrace of the spirit world and supernatural. Ghosts, Gods, and Goblins seem to co-exist with the high technology. It's so prevalent I started to believe it too. The manga, anime, cinema and TV dramas are all very imaginative this way and it feels as if the veil between this world and the next is easily pierced. Maybe that's why my montages are full of ghosts. My ancestors are always close by, hovering.

Influences, mentors, idols?

Jerry Uelsmann and Maggie Taylor are huge influences, as is Richard Prince. But I would have to thank my mentors, Barry Perlus and Jean Locey at Cornell for giving me a chance and nurturing my skills. Also a shout out to Buzz Spector for introducing me to the work of Roland Barthes.

What can you say about your workflow? Is there a method?

I work without a plan and futz around until the picture just feels right. Sometimes this takes a day but more often it's weeks or months. I don't keep to a schedule. There are long periods of dormancy, especially around finals and prep for the next semester. Then flurries of activity happen in bursts.

The photo below is of my "cozy room" in which I work on the montages with coffee and my laptop.



Describe your teaching. Do you have a particular message you like to share with your students?

As a photo teacher I try to help each student develop and articulate their unique vision to high standards. I do insist on keeping the darkroom because it fosters meticulousness and creates friendships. No phones in the darkroom means students actually talk to each other. At Grand Valley State University (Grand Rapids, MI) we have a very strong BFA program in the arts, although photography only offers a BA/BS. This is because we want students to take as many courses in other areas to foster interesting points of view and content in their photographs. To avoid tempting student to "follow the leader," I don't show my work to my students, unless they ask to see it. I want to find out what they are interested in, and then helping them to express it the best way they can. Most of my students are pretty independent and aren't interested in doing what I do.



Your work is challenging. How do you react to "What's that supposed to mean?" or "What's with all the birds? And butterflies?"

People in the Midwest are unfailingly polite and often shy away from pointed questions. They might ask an overall question like "what is it all about?" I've grown to understand that what I am trying to say is not necessarily what people will get from the images. The butterflies are transitional, short-lived and reference the Puccini opera, *Madame Butterfly*, which is a Western fantasy about Japan. Talk about taking liberties with historical narrative!

Talk about your gear... cameras, lights, peripherals, paraphernalia, gizmos, software?

My favorite camera is my big, old, clunky Polaroid 600 SE. I don't use it for this project but it's fun for portraits. I also recently purchased a Rolleicord that I use to photograph people on my walks. But, many of my own photos used in this series were taken with a Canon DSLR.



In addition to my own photos, I include pictures from antique shops, e-bay and sometimes the internet. I like to have the physical plate, print or negative. though, since the tactile sensation of holding the physical object helps me imagine possibilities.

Your images are clearly "hand made" and more like watercolor paintings than traditional inkjet prints.

This might stem from my background in printmaking and my love of working with pigments and textured paper. Inkjet prints provide no satisfaction for me. They're too easy and all the same. Where's the variation? Where's the thrill of making a good one?

Your final "product" is actually a completely unique, one-of-a-kind print.



Yes. The technique is digital bricolage alcohol transfer on paper. The collage is digitally assembled using computer software from digitized components but the final image is then transferred, by hand, to 24" x 32" high quality artist's paper. Images for exhibition are "floated" in glass frames, showing the paper's deckle edges.



For the techies and alt-process fans out there, how does it work?

The alcohol transfer process is actually pretty simple but does take some trial and error to get to work well. The key is to use fresh hand sanitizer with at least 70% alcohol. I use a 1 inch wide brush to spread it onto the paper.



I usually go over the area 3 times in different directions to ensure good coverage. Don't take too long or the alcohol will evaporate. An unsized, fine art printmaking paper like Arches 88 is ideal because it allows for the gel to soak in. But, regular drawing paper works, although it will wrinkle because of its thinness. Rice paper works well, too.

The Dass (dassart.com) transparency film that I use is designed for this and can be run through a regular inkjet printer. I used to set the paper profile to matte but more recently I changed it to luster. Not sure yet which I like better. Don't forget to reverse your image horizontally.

Once the paper is prepped I place the transparency down onto it and first go over it with a six inch wide rubber brayer. Then I use the heel of my palm to really rub it in. If your gel is too thick the image will smear.

Then I peel back from one corner in a diagonal direction slowly. If some parts of the image don't transfer I back up the motion and use pressure from my finger to aid the transfer. But, I do like the defects as they make each print unique.

The image will need some time to dry. This varies with humidity and the thickness of the paper.



What's next? A new project? Travel? Show(s)? A book?

I'm giving a talk in Portugal on Medusa, who I think of as the first photographer. After all, she was the first to transform flesh into mineralized form that could be leisurely gazed upon.

Your links, so we can stay in touch?

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Magazine

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